Iowa's Race to the Top Application

Frequently Asked Questions on the Application Process

Following is the first in a series of responses to Frequently Asked Questions about Iowa's Race to the Top application. Additional FAQs will be made available as more questions and answers are available. We will post a special FAQ about district participation and one about the Components of the Race to the Top Plan by January 4. You may submit additional questions at www.iowa.gov/educate.

BACKGROUND/OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

Q. Why is Iowa applying for Race to the Top?

A. Race to the Top represents an unprecedented opportunity for lowa to receive additional support for our educational improvement plans. The state will apply for a significant portion of funds to be used to supplement state funding of implementation of the lowa Core. The four core areas of reform in Race to the Top—standards and assessments, data systems, great teachers and leaders, and improving the lowest achieving schools—can support the implementation of the Iowa Core. Iowa has accomplished a lot in each of these four areas of reform and Race to the Top can support and enhance efforts already underway or planned.

Q. How much money will lowa get?

A. It is expected that only a few states will receive funding in this very competitive process. States have been told to request the amount they believe they need; there is not a set amount that any particular state will receive. However, the U.S. Department of Education did provide suggested ranges for how much to apply for. Iowa's suggested range is \$60 million - \$175 million over four years.

Q. What will the state do with its half of the grant funds?

A. Decisions will be made by January 4, 2010, about what the state's plans specifically will include. If lowa wins a Race to the Top grant, the state department of education has the authority to spend half of the Race to the Top funds. A portion of the budget (or other state funds) will need to be spent on each component in the application. A significant amount will go toward building the state's capacity to implement education improvements. Some will go toward each of the four reform areas—standards and assessments, data systems, great teachers and leaders, and improving the lowest achieving schools. We expect some of the state's allocation will be shared with a subset

of pilot districts that take part in difficult innovative efforts to improve education. Standards and accountability for these districts will likely be quite strict.

Q. What does this mean for the implementation of the Iowa Core?

A. The <u>lowa Core</u> provides the coherent vision toward which lowa's Race to the Top plan will aim. The four major reform areas that are prioritized in Race to the Top (standards and assessments, data systems, great teachers and leaders, and improving the lowest achieving schools) provide a foundation for strong implementation of the lowa Core. If lowa receives Race to the Top funds, we will be able to support deeper implementation of the lowa Core, as well as critical work needed in the Race to the Top's four major reform areas.

Q. Over how many years will Race to the Top funds available to the successful applicants?

A. Phase One funding will be available to successful states beginning in September 2010 and will continue for four years. It is possible for participating districts to phase in their participation over the four years. More information about the possibility of phase-in will be available January 4.

DISTRICT PARTICIPATION

Q. How do you sign up your district to participate and therefore become eligible for funding?

Districts must sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Iowa Department of Education that indicates the specific activities under Race to the Top that the district will participate in. Some activities will be required. The MOU template will be available to districts by January 4. There must be at least one signature on the MOU for districts, and that person must be able to legally bind the district into a contract. The required signature will be the president of the school board. The U.S. Department of Education would like to see at least three signatures on an MOU—the school board president, the superintendent, and the president of the local teachers association. We strongly encourage all three signatures on district MOUs in order for Iowa's application to be competitive and to ensure there is a level of commitment across your district to make the significant changes that will be required of Race to the Top districts.

Q. How much money will participating districts get?

A. In order to be eligible to receive funding, districts must sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the lowa Department of Education no later than 4:30 pm on January 14. Half of the Race to the Top grant will go directly to participating districts.

The amount each district would receive varies depending upon the size of the district and how many districts sign on to participate. The amount is determined by the district's funding formula for ESEA, Title I, relative to the other districts that participate. We anticipate a district's grant may range from \$20,000 on the low end up to over \$150,000 on the high end per district per year for four years. Again, the exact amount is completely dependent on how many of lowa's 361 districts choose to participate.

Q. If a district is only able to obtain 2 of the 3 required signatures, should they still submit an application?

A. Yes. Only one signature from someone with the authority to obligate the district is required. However, the application will be much stronger if all three signatures are included.

Q. Will there be a MOU "template" we will follow for consistent wording purposes?

A. Yes. The Memorandum of Understanding districts will need to complete will be available January 4. The U.S. Department of Education prepared a draft template. We are working off of that draft to customize it for lowa's plan. Information from the U.S. Department of Education about the MOU is found on pages 65-66 of The Race to the Top Application, found here; their draft template is found on pages 67-70.

Q. Do districts have the option to back out of our commitment once we know all the particular unknown details?

A. Details regarding this issue will be made available to districts by January 4.

Q. Will we know how much money we might receive before we have to sign off?

A. No. We will know the amount of money lowa is applying for, but the amount of money each district gets is dependent upon how many and which districts sign up to participate. If many districts sign up, each district receives a smaller share. If few districts sign up, each district will receive a larger share.

Q. Do funds only go to schools that are Title 1 schools under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)?

No. A district's share is determined by its Title 1 funding formula, but a district is not ineligible if some of its schools are not designated as Title 1 schools. A district may determine, within the parameters the state sets, how to spend its funds. It is possible for a district to use its funds on a non-Title I school within the district. However, a major goal of Race to the Top is to narrow achievement gaps, so many districts will target their funds toward that goal, which may mean targeted resources on the district's Title I schools.

Q. The Race to the Top application says that a "significant" number of school districts must participate in order to be competitive. How many is a "significant" number?

A. There is not a set number or percentage of districts that must participate. The application states there must be enough that a state can demonstrate "broad statewide impact" and that through Race to the Top we must be able to drive substantial gains in student achievement, improve high school graduation and college retention rates, and narrow achievement gaps. We must make the case in our application that the number of participating districts we have constitutes a "significant" number of our districts. We believe that the more districts we have, the stronger our application will be.

Q. If a district declines the invitation to participate in this initial application, will there be another option to join?

A. If Iowa does not win a Race to the Top grant in Phase One, we will reapply in Phase Two. Districts would have the option of signing up again in Phase Two.

If Iowa does win a Race to the Top grant in Phase One, only those districts that have signed MOUs will be able to receive funds out of the 50% of the grant that goes directly to districts. While the final rules have not been determined, it also is likely that only districts who have signed MOUs will be eligible to receive funding under the other 50% of the grant that goes to directly to the state.

Q. Will all lowa districts that want to participate be included or will the state select a few to be included?

A. The state cannot select which districts participate and are eligible to receive funding from the 50% pass-through to districts. Any district willing to sign the MOU and participate in the plan—and that submits their signed MOU by 4:30 pm on January 14—will be eligible. The state may select some districts to receive additional funds for complex projects that require significantly more effort and accountability. Information about these projects will be available January 4.

Q. What would district timelines look like for applications?

A. Districts should be learning about the Race to the Top program now. Watch our webinars here and here for background information. On January 4, detailed information will be available about what participation entails, along with a Memorandum of Understanding for signature. The Department of Education will hold regional informational events and webinars January 4-7 to help make sure districts understand lowa's particular Race to the Top plans and the process to sign on. Schools boards and local teacher associations may need to schedule special meetings between January 4

and January 13 to discuss the possibility of signing onto the Race to the Top application and therefore becoming eligible for funding.

APPLICATION PROCESS

Q. Why is the state convening work groups to complete the Race to the Top application? What are the Race to the Top application work groups and how were they selected?

A. The process for completing Iowa's RTTT application has been designed to maximize input while providing needed time for crafting narratives, gathering required data, and making strategic decisions about the direction of the application. The Department of Education has organized an advisory group and a number of work groups to support the process of responding to the 103-page application.

The Advisory Group provides overall advice and reviews the entire application to help make sure it is coherent, compelling, and comprehensive. In addition to the Advisory Group, there are six work groups; each group corresponds with the major sections of the RTTT application. The groups will meet several times during the application process to provide background information and advice on future plans within each of the sections of the application.

The Race to the Top application asks for local district superintendent, school boards, and teacher associations to put their signatures onto Memorandums of Understanding that say they will participate in the program. Therefore, we have prioritized representation of these constituencies in the work groups. The statewide associations representing these constituents—Iowa Association of Schools Boards, Iowa State Education Association, and School Administrators of Iowa—recommended participants to serve on each work group. The groups also include the State Board of Education, staff from the Governor's office, legislators and legislative staff, representatives of the Area Education Agencies, representatives of our community colleges and four-year colleges and universities, the Iowa PTA, the Iowa Business Council and business partners, the Urban Education Network, other agencies, and Department of Education staff.

A roster of work group participants can be found here.

Q. When will lowa's Race to the Top application be made publicly available?

A. January 19. Highlights of the state plans will be made available January 4. The full application will be between 300-500 pages in length, so summaries and highlights will be provided January 4 so districts can better understand the overall plan. Because this is a competitive process, the full application will not be shared until the review process is complete.

IOWA PARTNERS

Q. How do the Area Education Agencies (AEAs) fit in this plan?

One of Iowa's strengths is the way the Area Education Agencies (AEAs) have been developed to provide a network of support to Iowa's districts and schools. This regional infrastructure will be an important part of how we demonstrate that Iowa has the capacity to implement the Iowa Core and the Race to the Top reforms that will support implementation. Iowa has been working with West Wind Education Policy and the National Implementation Research Network to investigate ways to further develop state, regional, and local capacity for implementation of effective practices.

Q. How have the statewide associations been involved in this process? Will they be supportive of the plans in the application?

A. The Iowa State Education Association, the Iowa Association of School Boards, the Iowa Business Council, and the School Administrators of Iowa, among others have been involved in the process. We are working hard to craft plans in ways that all of our stakeholders will be able to support.

Q. How is higher education involved in this process?

A. Representatives of Iowa's public and private four-year institutions of higher education, community colleges, and the Board of Regents serve on the Advisory Group and Work Groups.

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

Q. Will changing the limits on Charter Schools require legislative action? If yes, is that possible by the deadline?

lowa will need to raise the cap and repeal date for charter schools in order to be competitive in the Race to the Top competition. Legislative language to do that is being drafted and will be offered as soon as the Legislature convenes. The current cap is set at twenty charter schools statewide; currently, there are only eight charter schools operating in the state.